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SUBJECT: GENDER VIOLENCE CAMPAIGN HIGHLIGHTS CONFLICTING STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

¶1. SUMMARY. The South African Government's "16 Days of Activism" gender violence awareness campaign brings into focus the conflicting status of women in South Africa. South Africa leads the region in the number of women at the parliamentary, cabinet, and deputy minister levels. NGOs, however, describe South Africa as a "war zone for women," singling out poverty, gender-based violence, and HIV/AIDS as the biggest problems facing South African women. The chasm between government's good intentions and limited legislative success and the reality facing South African women is real. This is a society in transition; while much progress has been made, there is a long way to go. END SUMMARY.

LOTS AT TOP

¶2. Following President Mbeki's April 28 appointment of 12 (of 28) women ministers and 10 (of 21) women deputy ministers (three more women ministers and two more women deputy ministers than in the previous cabinet), South Africa leads the South African Development Community (SADC) countries in the representation of women at the parliamentary, cabinet, and deputy minister levels. South Africa has not only surpassed the minimum 30 percent target of the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development -- with 33.4 percent of its MPs, 42.9 percent of its ministers, and 47.6 percent of its deputy ministers being women -- but it has also surpassed the African National Congress (ANC) target of 33 percent.

¶3. There are lower percentages of women at the provincial and municipal levels of government. The third annual conference of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) in 2004 released a report saying the representation of women at the local level of government was 29.06 percent, slightly up from 28 percent in 2000. The report also stated that political parties had few women candidates on their party lists and deployed even fewer to decision-making positions. Due to the perception of many delegates at the conference that the 29 percent figure was too low, Cape Town Mayor Nomawanda Mfeketo said to loud applause, "The women in this conference are saying they want 50 percent. They want 50 percent because they realize that they are mothers of this nation."

RURAL WOMEN THE WORST OFF BY FAR

¶4. Outside of government, Sheilah Meintjes, Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand and a former Commissioner at the Commission on Gender Equality, says two of the biggest problems facing South African women are poverty and gender-based violence. The majority of the 40 percent of unemployed South Africans are women, and even those women who are able to work often experience economic discrimination and sometimes sexual harassment. In July, the Department of Labor and the Commission for Employment Equity launched a report showing that South African women have never held more than 21 percent of top management positions and that they earned an average of 76 percent of their male counterparts' wages.

¶5. Meintjes calls gender-based violence "endemic" to South African society, and she notes that it crosses class and race. She says it is embedded in the idea of "men as superior citizens" and forms a continuum from sexual harassment to rape to murder. There are disputes over rape statistics, but the University of Cape Town's Unilever Institute of Strategic Marketing's 2004 gender survey indicated that South Africa may have the highest incidence of rape and wife battering in the world. The same survey indicated that a woman is raped every minute in South Africa, and that one-third of South African women are raped at some time during their lifetime.

¶6. The situation for many South African women, especially those poor to begin with, is worsening due to HIV/AIDS and the "collapse of NGOs," according to Susan Bazilli, an advisor at the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA), making "rural women the worst off they've been in ten years." The "feminization" of HIV/AIDS has led to 20 South African women being infected for every 10 South African men, where there are more people living with HIV/AIDS

in South Africa than anywhere in the world. HIV/AIDS is not only killing women, it is also placing a larger burden on them as they struggle to look after children whose parents have died. Bazilli also blames the worsening condition of rural women on the collapse of many NGOs due to donors' shift of resources from NGOs to government following the establishment of a democratic regime in 1994.

GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH

17. The three main bodies in the Government for dealing with gender issues are the constitutionally-mandated Commission on Gender Equality; the Office on the Status of Women and Gender Equality in the Presidency; and the Parliamentary Joint Monitoring Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Women. The first two, which are often viewed as rivals to each other, spend their time -- according to Meintjes -- "tinkering and tailoring." They tinker to put policies in place, to get a critical mass of women in prominent positions; and they tailor organizations to make them gender sensitive through training. But the Commission is swamped with more complaints than it can handle, and the Office on the Status of Women is mostly just an advisory body with only a small budget.

18. The Parliamentary Joint Committee has seen through several important pieces of legislation on customary law, domestic violence, and child support. Connie September, a Member of Parliament, thinks the high level of female representation at the national level has made a difference to South African women through making the law more gender friendly. For example, South Africa is one of the few African countries with a law specifically targeting domestic violence. In addition, the Justice for Women Campaign has successfully defended women for murdering their abusive partners. On the other hand, Mmatshilo Motsei, a consultant for the Women's Legal Rights Initiative, said South Africa needs to move from the "victories" at the legislative and judicial levels to the "realities" in the rural areas.

FROM VICTORIES TO REALITIES

19. The "realities" speak for themselves: 80 percent of female-headed households have no wage earners; 40 percent of Black African households are headed by women; 60 percent of female-headed households are poor; 70 percent of South African children under six live below the poverty line; and the majority of these children are living in households with only one parent, where in most cases the parent is a woman. But how, then, to move to "victories"? Some say changes need to be made in government and the private sector's institutional cultures, gender composition, and approaches towards human rights. Motsei stresses that change can only be accomplished through the revitalization of NGOs, and still others say there needs to be more publicizing of the laws and more cooperation from men.

10. Most analysts agree that on a deeper level societal attitudes must change. This includes the way parents raise their sons to be masculine protectors, who then become frustrated by the realities of not being able to work or otherwise support themselves or their families. This also includes a broader acceptance of the higher levels of education that women have achieved over the past ten years. In this sense, the continuing gender gap and all the problems that go along with it remain not an indication of a schizophrenic society but of a society in transition. The 16 Days of Activism campaign, which President Mbeki says should really be 365 days, is part of this slow transition.

FRAZER